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ABSTRACT

Recommendations for improving educational quality and strengthening public confidence in American higher education are offered, based on the deliberations of the National Commission on Higher Education, which existed for 1 year and held four meetings. Areas of concern include: setting priorities for the institution and strengthening administrative leadership (leadership selection, and governance and centralization); strengthening the relationships of institutional officers and faculties with state officials and the governing board; enhancing quality and strengthening finance (state and federal responsibilities in financing higher education, private philanthropy, and parent and student contributions to financing college studies); and assuring standards (accreditation systems, improving undergraduate degree programs, tenure and post-tenure evaluation, faculty salaries, and collective bargaining). The recommendations highlight the importance of: trustee support of priorities established for resource allocation; the methods of recruiting and selecting top administrators; assuring that students attending college demonstrate mastery of the basic skills; responding to the mandate for professional continuing education and the needs of adult learners; faculty tenure as a means to protect academic freedom; and increasing faculty salaries based on merit. (SW)

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To Strengthen Quality in Higher Education

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION ISSUES

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To Strengthen Quality in Higher Education

SUMMARY
RECOMMENDATIONS
OF THE
NATIONAL COMMISSION
ON HIGHER
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ISSUES

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION ISSUES

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November 1982

National Commission on Higher Education Issues
c/o American Council on Education
One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036

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Foreword

The National Commission on Higher Education Issues, composed of knowledgeable men and women inside and outside the postsecondary community, was established to help the nation's colleges and universities address some of their pressing concerns. The Commission, which existed for a year and held four meetings, was organized through the cooperation of ten presidential-level higher education associations and was financed by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

From the outset, the Commissioners decided not to be a study group, not to have background papers prepared, and not to publish a voluminous report for wide circulation. The goal was, rather, to take advantage of the differing perspectives and cumulative experience of the Commissioners in order to make a few concrete, brief, and practical recommendations to those who make policy and implement decisions in higher education.

For higher learning, the most precious asset is public confidence. Despite constrained resources, higher education has, on the whole, managed to maintain the quality of its programs. But there are signs that quality standards are being jeopardized. Criticism is growing that many entering students are deficient in the academic skills necessary to successful pursuit of higher education, along with the subsequent suggestion that degrees no longer certify that those who earn them are men and women of learning. These warning signs will be ignored only at great peril.

For this reason the Commission selected for its primary attention the issue of enhancing academic quality. During the course of its deliberations many other related matters were also addressed. The report presented here, however, deals only with those issues directly connected with improving quality in higher education and with strengthening public confidence in the nation's higher education institutions. As a result, the report reflects only a portion of the Commission's actual work.

When issues arose that were recognized as being addressed by other agencies, the Commission judged that the most useful course was to direct the staff to bring the Commission's recommendations to the attention of the appropriate groups. Such groups include the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching which is studying extensively the need to improve relations between the postsecondary community and those responsible for education in the schools, especially at the secondary level. The Foundation also continues to study and report on various governance issues in higher education. Two other associations to which recommendations were given are the Association of American Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, both of which are pursuing studies and projects concerned with the redefinition of the meaning and purpose of baccalaureate degrees.

Higher education in the United States is characterized by a vast range of institutional settings. This diversity makes it difficult to formulate recommendations that are appropriate for all institutions. Moreover, given the contribution that higher education makes to this nation's well-being, the Commission might well have been tempted to formulate recommendations in language that would articulate to the public the significance of the educational enterprise. But this report is written for policy shapers and decision makers. The recommendations are not elaborately argued since the issues are familiar to the community. It is hoped that the conclusions of this knowledgeable group of Commissioners will be of assistance. Although the recommendations are stated in forthright terms, the members kept in mind that each institution is unique and that few recommendations can be appropriate to all institutions.

The recommendations reflect a consensus of the Commissioners, but no particular member should be held accountable for each recommendation. I am particularly grateful to each Commissioner for his or her dedication to the educational enterprise. As chair of the drafting committee, Barry Munitz brought together the discussions in an admirable fashion. In pursuing this task, he was ably associated with John B. Bennett of the American Council on Education.

Acknowledgment is owed especially to Thomas M. Stauffer, who served as staff director for the Commission, for his creative support of the Commission's work. The ten higher education associations that participated in establishing the Commission included the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education, Association of American Colleges, Association of American Universities, Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, The Council of Independent Colleges, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, and National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

The Commission members and staff gratefully acknowledge their debt of gratitude to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for the grant that made the deliberations possible and express the hope that the results will prove advantageous to higher education.

Robben W. Fleming, *Chair*
National Commission on
Higher Education Issues

Setting Priorities and Strengthening Administrative Leadership

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission concluded that the greatest danger to quality in higher education in the 1980s is "cuts-across-the-board." Higher education has been on short rations for at least a decade. Certainly few programs are to be found that do not serve legitimate educational needs. At most institutions, the obvious savings have been made. In many instances, reserves are being deeply eroded. Future budgetary cuts will seriously jeopardize quality. If budgets are further reduced, the critical question becomes how to reduce the scope of what is attempted. This practical approach is far preferable to maintaining all existing programs but at a level that erodes the quality of all.

The pressures to make cuts across the board are tremendous, in both the public and the independent sectors. Administrators who take a little from all programs will run into less resistance than will those who try to establish priorities. Yet even over a relatively short period, the practices of the former are far more likely than the latter to threaten the quality of the enterprise.

To counter these understandable pressures, the chief executive of each institution should ensure that appropriate campus constituencies are fully involved in the establishment and timely review of mission statements, role and scope documents, and detailed strategic plans setting forth internal priorities. Resource distribution must follow these priorities, thereby reflecting and securing institutional objectives in a changing environment. Boards of trustees, which have the ultimate responsibility for institutional priorities, should support the chief executive in making resource allocations that follow these priorities. *Priorities among allocations are likely to be controversial, and unless they are accorded trustee support, "across the boardism" is likely to prevail and thus quality will be jeopardized.*

LEADERSHIP SELECTION

The methods of recruiting and selecting administrators, particularly chief executives, are open to substantial improvement. Con-

fidentiality is no longer the norm; many procedures are politicized; candidates are reluctant to expose themselves to the process; and tension has grown between faculty-based screening committees and boards of trustees. Increasingly, the names of candidates are released to the public prematurely and sometimes in an embarrassing manner. As a result, many highly qualified candidates, especially sitting presidents at other institutions, no longer are willing to allow their names to be considered. The result of all these impediments is a longer and more costly selection process, limited candidate pools, and increased difficulties in executive transition.

The Commission recommends that *all persons involved in the search process should be instructed in the importance of maintaining confidentiality as a condition of their involvement.* It further recommends that, to minimize the problem of breach of confidentiality, *state legislatures should modify "sunshine laws" as they apply to the selection of institutional officers and faculty members.*[1]

The Commission fully endorses the need for formal selection procedures and strongly supports the development of meaningful and productive affirmative action strategies to ensure that women and minority candidates are included.

The lay governing board is one of this nation's signal contributions to quality higher education. It is important that this basic link between internal and external constituencies be as strong as possible. Elected officials or nominating committees that propose names for membership on governing boards of public or private colleges and universities should be sensitive to the essential educational mission of these boards. In public institutions, although partisan judgments and, indeed, political influence are relevant to the selection process, *trustees should be selected fundamentally on the basis of their interest in, concern for, and ability to serve and advance higher education.* Any attempts to select persons on the basis of factors irrelevant to academic values should be resisted.

GOVERNANCE AND CENTRALIZATION

At a time of limited resources, the Commission recognizes the need both to husband resources and to respond to community and regional needs. Yet, its deliberations led to a healthy skepticism with respect to centralization of authority in higher education and to the conviction that quality may be jeopardized when decisions about academic programs are made by agencies remote from

1. Commission member Edward B. Fiske specifies that he must disassociate himself from the recommendations regarding confidentiality in the search process and modification of "sunshine laws."

institutions. Concern was expressed that in some states authority over institutions has become overly centralized.

Governors and legislatures should review the current pattern of coordination to determine whether evolution of the coordinating machinery has led toward lowest-common-denominator policies and destroyed the institutional flexibility that is required to sustain quality programs.

The Commission recommends that governing boards ensure that all institutions under their jurisdiction have in place procedures for systematic program evaluation. Coordinating agencies should, appropriately, see that all public institutions and those independent institutions which receive direct state support subject their programs to a rigorous process of evaluation. *The actual program evaluations should, however, be conducted at or below the level of the institutional governing board and should include extensive peer group judgments.*

Staffs of statewide coordinating boards and other public agencies concerned with higher education can, by wise and diplomatic prodding, become important components of the educational governance structure. Thus, their staff members should be selected and compensated as befits their important role. They should then be treated by university and college leaders in an open and informative fashion as partners rather than as adversaries. The same openness should characterize the relationships of institutional officers and faculties with state legislators and governors.

Enhancing Quality and Strengthening Finance

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The relationship between quality and the adequacy of resources is much more subtle than that expressed by the proposition that the greater the resources, the higher the quality. More money does not always mean higher quality, and less money does not necessarily reduce quality. In the face of budgetary stringency, good institutions will be able to protect those activities of highest quality and relevance to their mission while deciding which other activities to eliminate.

Nonetheless, quality is directly affected by not only the level but also the sources and stability of funding. To be sure, institutions or programs that receive public funding must be accountable for its use and provide the appropriate offices with full and complete data. Still, the highest levels of quality and efficiency will be achieved only when each institution is given maximum freedom to allocate its funds with minimal external interference. *The Commission recommends that those who allocate public funds provide incentives for efficient resource allocation and systematic evaluation of educational and managerial effectiveness.*

The continuing health of America's independent and public colleges and universities is vital to the future of the nation, and each is essential to the well-being of the other. Public colleges and universities and independent colleges and universities constitute an academic system that nourishes our country through its teaching, research, and service. The best interests of our nation are served by supporting their respective needs and endeavors so that each may contribute in its appropriate way. *The federal and state governments should take no steps that might impair the viability of this dual system in the years to come.*

Both public and independent institutions are financed to a varying extent by students and their families, private philanthropy, the states, and the federal government. Multiple funding, by its very nature, is one of the strengths of American higher education. Examination of the various sources of funding by the Commission led it to set forth some expectations for each.

STATES

In addition to stable funding, the greatest contribution states can make to promote quality in the public institutions is to assure that their funding mechanisms are not overly enrollment-driven. *Formulas based on enrollments provide little incentive to improve programs. Similarly, automatic year-end reversion of unexpended appropriations encourages spending and discourages both resource conservation and increased efficiency.*

State legislatures should avoid line-item budgets, position controls, and other mechanisms that work against the general principle of institutional flexibility within the framework of accountability. Such detailed budget requirements discourage effective and efficient administration.

All states should consider following the practice of the national government and those states that have established funds for the improvement of postsecondary education. These relatively modest funds, distributed on a competitive basis to institutions for special projects designed to enhance quality programs, have proved to be most productive.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

A vital federal responsibility in higher education is to provide a student aid system that will assure access and choice to all qualified students. This responsibility is shared with families, students, and the states. However, it is federal aid to students that largely accounts for the high rates of participation so essential to the continued health of the nation's economy and the well-being of the society. *The Commission is pleased to note the bipartisan support for the federal role in providing student financial assistance and it recommends a continuing strong federal commitment.*

Federal primacy in the support of basic and applied research in universities preceded the growth in the student aid system. Such support recognizes that progress in technology, productivity, and economic growth and advances in medical science and space require that our universities have the capability to carry out that research. Yet, current grant and cost reimbursement policies fail to cover the real costs to the institutions for these research activities. *The Commission recommends that the federal government assume a greater responsibility for the maintenance of research capabilities at our universities.*

PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY

Though investment income and gifts may not be large as a proportion of the total resource base for higher education, they are indispensable and provide the vital margin for upholding quality in many of our colleges and universities. Institutions must become more sensitive to the changing needs of corporations for skilled personnel, and the corporations must increase their giving in recognition of the vital role that colleges and universities contribute to the health of the economy and to the quality of life in our country.

The interdependence between higher education and the private business sector is much greater than is commonly recognized. In fact, a strong national economy reflects, and is fundamentally dependent on, a strong community of higher education. Accordingly, *both business and higher education should recognize and act on the unrealized potential for enhanced cooperation and increased productivity.*

STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Over the next several years, it seems clear, the costs of higher education will continue to rise. Unless existing financing sources are increased to meet these rising costs, fees will have to be

increased substantially at both public and independent institutions. *In that case, mechanisms will have to be available to assist families. Specifically, institutions, banks, and the government will need to provide additional funds for student aid, in the form of grants, work-study monies, and loan capital.* The Commission expressed grave concern about the increasing numbers of graduating students who are burdened with heavy indebtedness for educational expenses.

Assuring Standards SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

No other issue consumed more of the Commission's debating time than did the question of quality standards. But on no other issue was there greater difficulty in reaching clear and concise recommendations.

It is easy to be dogmatic about raising institutional standards. However, the strength of America's higher education lies in its diversity and in the jealously guarded autonomy of each institution to experiment and establish its own standards. The Commission has no desire to urge recommendations that would undermine institutional autonomy.

Additionally, the words "quality" and "excellence" can too easily become code words for excluding from the postsecondary community all students except those who have had the advantages of a strong college-preparatory education. It is also too easy to assume that "quality" means simply what happens when the academically best-qualified students are admitted to the most prestigious institutions. Obviously, these narrow definitions are not those of the Commission.

ACCREDITATION AND DIPLOMA MILLS

The Commission endorses the present system of voluntary, nongovernmental accreditation, the center of higher education's self-regulation efforts. However, *the accreditation system, especially the policy-making bodies and evaluating teams, should include more administrators and faculty members from institutions known and respected for their high quality.* Such persons should consider it part of their professional responsibility to participate in the accreditation process. Institutional accreditation processes should focus greater attention on the integrity of academic de-

grees, and particularly on institutional procedures for assuring that graduates have mastered the basic academic competencies.

The Commission recommends that the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation be more vigorous in controlling the proliferation of specialized accrediting agencies. Although resources, faculty salaries, office space, and other such matters are related to the quality of educational programs, *specialized accrediting agencies should focus on institutional procedures for assuring that degrees are conferred only on students who have met stated requirements.* Such matters as the allocation of resources, conditions of faculty service, facilities, and administrative support should be left to the discretion of institutions.

State officials, working with the Education Commission of the States, should renew their attack on diploma mills, which offer alleged academic degrees but require little or no work. The Education Commission of the States has developed model legislation designed to thwart the operation of fraudulent institutions. Public confidence in legitimate institutions of higher education would be improved were all states to adopt and enforce such legislation.

CURRICULUM

The Commission applauds the efforts currently under way to improve and strengthen undergraduate degree programs. Although it debated at some length a more precise definition of the associate and baccalaureate degrees, and explored the concept of "educational warranty," no clear consensus emerged other than the recognition that these remain vital issues and demand continued study.

With respect to the quality of undergraduate education, the Commission calls to the attention of colleges and universities the concerns expressed by such national bodies as the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies, the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities, the National Research Council, and the Association of American Colleges. These bodies have concluded that, with few exceptions, the nation's colleges and universities are not providing future civic, business, and professional leaders with the understanding of foreign languages and cultures, of the roots of our own civilization and culture, and of the powers and limitations of science and technology that they will need to carry out both public and private responsibilities. The Commission notes that these are vexing problems and urges that the nation's faculties and administrators, in concert with others, give high priority to their correction.

The Commission did conclude that no student should be admitted to full participation in any baccalaureate degree program who has not demonstrated fundamental competencies in

reading, writing, speaking, mathematical techniques, and reasoning. Colleges and universities should work with state high school officials to establish the following minimum units of high school study, or their GED or other equivalent, for college preparation: four years of English, three years of mathematics and computation, two years of science, two years of foreign language, and three years distributed among the social sciences and the humanities.

Colleges and universities share with the primary and secondary levels responsibilities for helping to develop the competence of those who do not meet the requirements for full participation in programs leading to the baccalaureate and who wish to acquire such competence. Such students should have access to remedial work and other appropriate assistance.

Likewise, for persons who wish to upgrade their career opportunities and to advance their education, institutions must make it easier for them to participate in professional and continuing education programs. Such students should be allowed to pursue their educational objectives without undue disruption and without having to take courses merely to certify knowledge and skills already mastered. *Institutions should develop clear criteria for measuring and recognizing previously attained competencies and for linking measurement results to campus requirements for degrees and to proper placements of students in academic programs. Failure to make such provisions dulls incentive and squanders personal, institutional, and public resources.*

The future of higher education institutions is inextricably bound with adult and continuing education. Lifelong learning is more than a simple catch phrase. It has meaning and importance to the individual and to society. It is a responsibility of higher education, by both mission and role. *Appropriate and timely offerings should be provided, and adequate financial support for adult learning should be available.*

The Commission recognizes that perhaps one of the most acute educational problems facing this nation—one most directly related to assuring quality in higher education—is the need to improve the preparation of those who teach in the primary and secondary schools. The issue of recruiting and retaining the best possible teachers involves many factors other than their training during college years, but it is this training for which colleges and universities are responsible. *The Commission feels strongly that both the attractiveness of the profession of teaching and teacher preparation itself must be improved.* Foundation support could be used to advantage in identifying appropriate strategies.

Certainly high priority should be given to eliminating substandard teacher education programs. Similarly, administrators and faculty members of appropriate higher educational institutions should work with state policy makers and appropriate representatives of the elementary and secondary school systems to

ensure that teacher certification requirements are related to performance rather than to protection of the profession.

TENURE AND POSTTENURE EVALUATION

The Commission strongly affirms the continuing importance of faculty tenure as an essential instrument to protect academic freedom, and thereby ensure the highest quality in teaching and research. It endorses the description of tenure of the Commission on Academic Tenure in Higher Education, a commission sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and the American Association of University Professors:

> An arrangement under which faculty appointments in an institution of higher education are continued until retirement for age or physical disability, subject to dismissal for adequate cause or unavoidable termination on account of financial exigency or change of institutional program.[1]

That commission urged all institutions "to take prompt and vigorous measures to improve the operation of present tenure plans in order to correct deficiencies which have become increasingly apparent in recent years" (p.39). Since then many institutions have tightened their evaluation procedures in line with this recommendation. *But the time has come for campus administrations and faculties to review and, if needed, revise their procedures in order to assure themselves and the public that the procedures will produce fair, rigorous, and relevant evaluations.*

In the evaluation of faculty members, confidentiality is essential to frank and candid assessments of professional qualifications. A statement of procedures by which academic judgments are made should be open for inspection so that candidates and other members of educational communities can be assured that the processes of evaluation provide for full and fair review of qualifications. An avenue of redress should be available if improprieties in the process are believed to have occurred, including judgments based on factors of race, sex, or other irrelevant matters. Candidates for faculty advancement should be afforded the opportunity to know and benefit from the deliberation of peers. When these three principles are incorporated into the review process, confidentiality protects the rigor and objectivity of judgments.

One statement on confidentiality adopted by the Board of Directors of the American Council on Education and another statement on the same subject endorsed by the membership of the

1. Commission of Academic Tenure, William R. Keast, Chairman, *Faculty Tenure: A Report and Recommendations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973), p. 256.

Association of American Universities provide more elaborate comments on this important matter.[2]

Academic tenure is not a guarantee of a job for life short of disability or economic disaster. In the judgment of the Commission, *nothing will undermine the tenure system more completely than its being regarded as a system to protect faculty members from evaluations.* Although the burden is on the institution to demonstrate "adequate cause" by peer-group judgments, "demonstrated incompetency" is adequate cause for dismissal.

Campus academic administrators, working closely with appropriate faculty committees, should develop a system of posttenure evaluation. The process should provide for periodic peer-group reviews to assure that the tenured faculty has maintained the appropriate level of competence and is performing at a satisfactory level. When equitable procedures identify faculty members of "demonstrated incompetency," the administration and faculty's responsibility is to see that the particular problem is remedied and not glossed over. Incompetent faculty members must not be protected at the expense of the students or the maintenance of quality.

Likewise, *campuses should devise and implement regular procedures for evaluating academic administrators.* Such evaluations should be timely and thorough, and should provide for the professional development of the incumbents under review as well as for the improvement of overall organizational efficiency.

FACULTY SALARIES

Academic salaries have not kept pace with inflation. The resulting decline in standard of living, coupled with a reduction in support for research opportunities, especially for faculty members in the humanities, has affected morale. Inadequate compensation makes it difficult to attract and retain many talented persons, particularly in fields where academic salaries are unreasonably noncompetitive with those in the private enterprise sector. Lower morale generates a sense of negativism toward the academic enterprise. The resulting threat to quality is clear. *The Commission contends that increasing faculty salaries is among the higher priorities in the internal allocation of resources.*

In the allotment of salary funds, the Commission recommends that *faculty compensation should be based primarily on merit, as determined by a careful peer-group and administrative evaluation of individual accomplishments.* High inflation and

2. The statements are both titled "Confidentiality of University Faculty Personnel Files: Its Appropriate Role in Institutional Affairs," although the two texts differ at several points. The ACE Board adopted its statement on October 13, 1981; the AAU statement was endorsed by its membership at its April 1982 meeting.

equity considerations may justify salary increases by category or according to time in grade; still, *professional incentives and high-level performance are jeopardized by compensation programs that fail to take account of individual performance.*

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Collective bargaining as an established feature of American life is widespread among craft workers, industrial workers, health services employees, white-collar workers in commerce, and employees in the public service. In higher education, it has developed more recently among faculties, though it has long been used by support staff employees. Its effect on institutional quality is still uncertain, if hotly debated. Several things are, however, clear. (*a*) The debate will continue, and the verdict about the effects of collective bargaining on the academic enterprise remains in question. (*b*) Collective bargaining as a process is both legitimate and within the rights of faculties to pursue. (*c*) Both institutional administrators and faculty leaders are relatively unversed in the process, compared with other sectors, and should take pains to prepare themselves well if collective bargaining is contemplated. (*d*) Collective bargaining is a highly serious step in faculty-administration relations, and those in institutions where bargaining is in the offing should closely examine the experience in other institutions where faculties bargain collectively to see what changes in relationships may occur. And (*e*) Both the administration and faculty in an institution with collective bargaining will be unfaithful to their primary obligation—the conduct of high-quality teaching, research, and service—if they incorporate in their negotiated contracts provisions that impede fulfillment of that obligation.

Agenda for the Future

The continued welfare of the United States is tied inextricably to its higher education institutions. Strong colleges and universities are integral to the nation's vigor—economically, culturally, even spiritually. In an increasingly knowledge-based society, the importance of that relationship can only grow. Recent decades have witnessed sharp expansion in college enrollments, institutional budgets, and university research activities. This growth has been no accident, since complex technical societies need equally complex higher educational resources. Prosperity in such societies rests upon healthy colleges and universities.

The Commission's focused agenda for continued qualitative growth is reasonable and actionable. It calls upon every campus administrator, board member, and public official to advance higher education's welfare and to address strengthening its quality. Acting on the Commission's recommendations, higher education can attain a greater sense of purpose and forward movement. Most critically, students and society will benefit from this modest but firm commitment.

The National Commission on Higher Education Issues offers its recommendations in the firm belief that higher education can participate effectively in leadership of the nation and the world. Academicians confront in the agenda offered by this report significant opportunities to benefit humankind and, at the same time, to gain a renewed sense of direction and dedication for themselves.